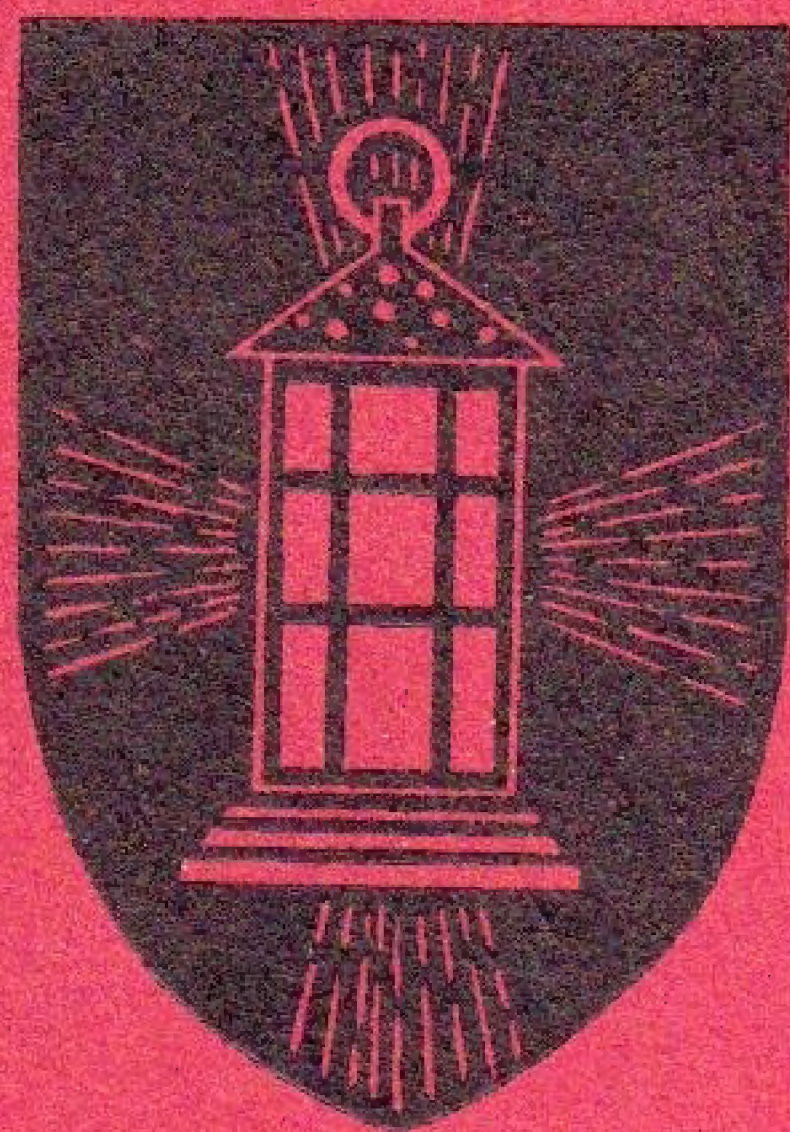


Is Christianity "Wishful Thinking"?

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Is Christianity "Wishful Thinking"?

NOWADAYS everyone with the slightest smattering of sophistication is familiar with the idea of "wishful thinking." Modern psychologists tell us that in all matters where strong feelings are involved, we tend to think with our emotions rather than with our brains. Our desires impel us to accept some satisfying belief. Then we "rationalize"—that is, we erect a falsefront of reasons which will protect and validate our irrational urges. Certain prophets of modernity, with a glee which itself seems rather wishful, have applied this idea to religion in general and Christianity in particular, so that the Christian has become a prime example of the "wishful thinker" type.

In analyzing this notion I shall not attempt to deny that the Christian is a wishful thinker, nor shall I appeal to any transcendental concep-

tion of the rights and powers of the imaginative will. I merely wish to argue, on common-sense principles which should appeal alike to believer and unbeliever, that there is no reason to regard the religious person as more wishful than the non-religious person. I must add, however, that I am talking about orthodox Christianity, not about the vaguely sentimental cult of good-nature and social service which often masquerades as Christianity. That pseudo-religion, I cheerfully grant, is an extreme example of what psychologists mean by "wishfulness."

No one who is acquainted with genuine Christianity can brand it as wishful without making important reservations. Needless to say, it satisfies universal and deeply-rooted human longings: it offers love, joy, freedom, and peace. But these blessings are to be gained only by undergoing an intellectual, spiritual, and moral discipline which constantly slaps dear old Mother Nature in the face. The crucifix is not exactly a symbol of "sugar and spice and all things nice." Anyone who has tried—and failed—to walk in the way of the Cross knows that it is a difficult and often a very unpleasant business.

Those self-styled Christians to whom Easter means a great deal and Good Friday nothing at all have missed the whole significance of Christianity. There is no way of reaching Easter without passing through Good Friday, and Good Friday is the least wishful day of the year.

For most people, after all, the great ultimate conceptions of God, free will, and immortality are very abstract and shadowy. Few of us live with such unthinkable thoughts day by day. They are shut up in a "best parlor" of the mind which is seldom used except for christenings, weddings, and funerals. Meanwhile there are immensely powerful wishes which tug at the thoughts of the human animal throughout his everyday life—wishes of pride, envy, lust, anger, avarice, laziness, and intemperance. Do you know any stronger wishes? Is anything easier and pleasanter than to give in to these desires and to fabricate apparently good reasons for indulging them? The psychologist will hasten to grant the potency of these motives in the life and thought of man. But long before there were any psychologists there was a Christian Church which listed seven deadly sins: pride, envy, lust,

wrath, greed, sloth, and gluttony. Some of these can be redeemed or sublimated, but in their natural state they are the deadly enemies of Christianity. These sins represent what we really wish unless by a great effort we will to wish something better. Strangely enough, this is sound psychology and good unsentimental Christianity.

There is a sense, then, in which Christian thinking is about as unwishful as one can expect human thinking to be. In fact those who sneer at Christianity as wishful are likely in the next breath to condemn its hostile attitude toward natural human impulses. This is a quite separate problem which I cannot discuss. I would merely observe that if Christianity is at the same time a matter of emotional "letting go" and a matter of unnatural repression it must be a very queer religion indeed.

Christianity really *is* a queer religion, and outsiders seldom understand it very well. To them it looks so easy to say "I believe" and then be completely at rest. They have never had to shrink before the question, "Are ye able to drink of the cup that I shall drink of?" The thorough-

going analyst of wishful thinking, of course, can find sub-rational motives everywhere. He can argue that the Christian finds it easy to spurn certain wishes because he is so constituted that other wishes move him more strongly. If this is true, one may urge that it is better to be moved by the desires of religion than by the desires of irreligion. But the best answer is that the Christian finds it very hard indeed to spurn the wishes arising from the seven deadly sins, and frequently fails to do so. It is merely that he believes in trying. If only those who think of Christianity as soft, easy and pretty could experience the discipline, the self-abnegation, the majestic sadness, the terrible heart-searching austerity of the Faith! Some moderns are too willing to draw their notion of religion from people who know nothing about it.

We can never tell how completely human reason is swayed by sub-rational urges, for in this case the phenomenon to be investigated and the instrument of investigation are the same thing—the human mind. But for the sake of the argument let us concede everything that the most cynical psychologist could desire; let us grant

that man's thinking is controlled by impulses which have very little to do with reason. This viewpoint would seem to imply an absolute scepticism. In this matter, however, the opponent of religion is strangely inconsistent. He is resolutely sceptical about the rationality of the Christian, but he has a quite irrational faith in his own rationality. Yet if this notion of wishful thinking is valid, it is only fair to apply it to everybody. Of course some people are more easily swayed by their feelings than others. It goes without saying that the person whose opinions differ from yours is less purely rational than you are. But there seems to be no way of measuring degrees of wishfulness objectively and quantitatively, for the results of the experiment would have to be interpreted by a wishful thinker who would of course find just what he was looking for.

Though the Christian cannot deny that his thinking is influenced by sub-rational factors, he is entitled to say that the same is true of the agnostic. The refusal to affirm beliefs which are infinitely desirable may seem to be a triumph of intellectual asceticism. We can be pretty sure,

however, that the agnostic *would* believe unless he desired *not* to believe.

The agnostic may be influenced by one or more of a large number of passional urges. He may have been "conditioned" against religion in childhood,—either by sceptical parents or by parents whose piety was too grim or too sentimental for a healthy child. As he grew up, he may have been repelled by hearing a few idiotic sermons or meeting a few offensive parsons, and then may have leapt to the absurd conclusion that Christianity is false.

He thinks himself superior to dogmatic authority, but he may have accepted with irrational meekness the authority of certain books, the dicta of certain professors, or the prejudices of a certain social group. He spurns tradition, but his ever-so-modern ideas can easily be traced back through the eighteenth century to the Renaissance and thence to the Greeks. He is quite as much the product of a tradition as the Christian.

He has probably been impressed by the seamy side of the history of the Church and the failure of Christians to live up to their own stand-

ards. He will tell you of religious wars, the Inquisition, Galileo, the sale of indulgences, dark doings in nunneries, William Jennings Bryan, and monkeys. Never having approached the heart of Christianity, he is wishfully prompt to identify these perversions with the thing itself. In this connection, think how indignant an orthodox Communist would be if we argued that the present disturbances in Russia prove the falsity of Marx's doctrines. That would be capitalistic wishfulness!

Perhaps the agnostic has withdrawn from the confusion of modern life to the clean, cool, precision of that twentieth-century monastery of mechanism, the experimental laboratory. There he may have seen a highly imaginative and passionate vision of a universe that would be like a great cosmic laboratory through and through. Since supernatural religion would blur this vision by introducing all sorts of perplexing and imponderable factors, it must be banished from the mind. The impulse to imagine the cosmos as a shipshape, workable gadget is irresistible to some temperaments. In these days, too, the agnostic has often embraced, largely on

emotional grounds, some quasi-religious faith opposed to Christianity. If the worshipper of Jesus is wishful, what shall be said of the worshipper of Lenin or Hitler?

Communism and Fascism are not the only bootleg religions. The apparently hard-headed unbeliever is often a very soft-hearted sentimentalist who shrinks from the realism and severity of the Christian Faith. To deny the claims of supernatural religion give him a stiffening sense of intellectual probity, but he is full of warmly muddled illusions about progress, humanity, social service, and the goodness of his own feeling heart.

Many supposed believers really believe in God very strongly, but have a personal grudge against Him. They have been bereaved of a wife or child, or they themselves have suffered a physical affliction. Some people *lose* religion for such reasons; others *get* religion for exactly the same reasons. Which group is the more wishful?

Deeper and stronger than all these urges, alongside of the religious impulse in the heart of man there lies the desire to be perfectly free

from all external control. The hardest words to say with complete sincerity are, "*Thy* will be done." The impulse to say, "*My* will be done" can be rationalized into various forms of wishful irreligion.

Evidently, then, the will *not* to believe may be quite as sub-rational as the will to believe. What's sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander. When we subject the agnostic to the same sort of sceptical analysis as he applies to the Christian we get very similar results. The popular habit of dividing mankind into austere rational unbelievers and sloppily wishful believers is very immature psychology.

Although it may be true that we are all wishful thinkers, we have seen that the Christian is less wishful, and the agnostic more wishful, than might be supposed. Finally let us ask what human thinking would be like if it were *not* wishful. The obvious answer is that if wishfulness disappeared, thinking would disappear along with it; for all our thinking is motivated by the desire for some particular kind of satisfaction. Remove this desire, and the mind would never focus on anything. Even the most objec-

tive scientific research is urged on by the hope that nature may give a certain answer to a certain question. All teachers know that the really hopeless student is not the one who has all sorts of crazy, immature wishes, but the one who has no discernible wishes at all. He will never have an idea until life gives him a desire.

But though wishfulness is an essential force in thinking, it is sometimes a very disturbing one. It may speed our minds straight to the target, or may lead them utterly astray. We must distinguish between the flabby, passive, drifting kind of wishfulness that gets us nowhere, and the alert, concentrated, dynamic kind of wishfulness that often unlocks the secrets of the universe. In practice, of course, it is always the other fellow who has the wrong kind of wishfulness, but who will undertake to prove that the Christian is incapable of the right kind?

True, we are liable to make terrible mistakes unless we test our wishful hypotheses as rationally as we can, rejecting them if they do not hold water. But in its own field, Christianity can be tested as stringently as any other non-scientific theory. Evidence for it can be drawn

from metaphysics, logic, esthetics, psychology, anthropology, history, written testimony, oral tradition, general human experience and personal experience. For some wishful people this evidence is conclusive; for other equally wishful people it is not. Unless we want to stultify ourselves completely we had better make up our own minds without worrying too much about our sub-rational urges.

When one is confronted by a startling modern notion, it is often soothing to remember how extremely old it is. Intelligent people have always been aware that their feelings have a strong influence upon their reasoning. The idea goes back at least as far as the Greek sceptics. Renaissance and seventeenth-century men like Montaigne, Bacon, Hobbes, and Pascal were familiar with it, and in the eighteenth century it is simply a commonplace.

Originally, however, "wishful thinking" meant that you and I reason very badly,—which is true. It now usually means that you reason very badly but I reason very well,—which is probably false. In the present century this one-sided view of wishfulness has been advanced with an

air of brilliant discovery by persons who are eager to discredit traditional concepts in religion, politics and economics. This is not their sole motive, but it is a very strong one. Their emotional bias is shown by their eagerness to assume that the defenders of an old idea are always more wishful than the champions of a new one. A moment's reflection should convince you that this is nonsense. Be he right or wrong, no human being is more wishful than the member of an excited minority.

The idea of wishful thinking, then, has lost the urbanely cynical wisdom which it once possessed, and has become the weapon of a particular set of extremely wishful thinkers. I have tried to show that it is not a very formidable weapon so far as religion is concerned. If you call your opponent a wishful thinker, he can say the same of you. Since there is no earthly way of telling which of you is the more wishful, the factor of wishfulness simply cancels out and you are just where you were before,—two human beings trying to use that queer mixture of thinking and feeling that we call reason. As a check on our personal cocksureness the idea of

wishful thinking may often be salutary; as a means of proving or disproving anything about religion it is completely worthless.

This common-sense view of the matter, of course, leaves unexplained the paradox of human thought,—its marvellous power, its abject weakness. The explanation offered by Christianity is so clear and simple that it may be worth considering. To the extent that he is a rebellious beast, man is indeed a wishful thinker in the worst sense, for he is enslaved by a tendency to wish what is wrong and false. To the extent that he is an obedient and loving child of God, man possesses the noble faculty of reason. This faculty does not exclude the passions; but if man can make his will a faithful reflection of God's will he may rest assured that reason and desire, working harmoniously together, will lead him into all truth. Can you think of a better answer to the problem?

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